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Language Arts, 6

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Interview

The 1950’s, a golden era in American history; a war rages overseas in Korea, and back at home Elvis croons on the radio with tunes like “Ain’t Nothing But a Hound Dog”. My grandmother’s eyes, bright and blue, twinkle with the rememberance of long forgotten memories as I question her about her days as a school teacher. The interview that follows lends a glimpse back into a different period, when times were simpler, skirts were longer, and teachers were stricter. My grandmother, then a slender young woman in her 20’s, was privileged with a job as an elementary school teacher in Butler Pensylvania. Through her work she earned not only a living, but an unstoppable work ethic, a unique understanding of children, and the desire to spread and share the wealth and power of knowledge with all those whose path she would cross.

The bell rings noisily resounding through the halls at promply 8:00 every morning. Scores of first graders perch atop their desks, seated in neat rows behind the teacher. Little decoration adorns the classroom and chatter is nonexistent. The entrie time the children sit still, frozen in place, moving only their hands as they feverishly scratch out answers. The curriculum is straightforward, simple; a stong empahsis on reading, addition and subtraction, science, and the basics of history. Besides a new list of spelling words each week, the lessons remain unchanged. Music and art teachers, laden down with paintbrushes and tambourines, travel from school to school, classroom to classroom showing up once a week to sing and draw with the young children . Mrs. Blair spends the morning perched behind her desk reading aloud from behind the covers of glossy picture books, her singsong-y voice the only sound vibrating off the walls. She stops momentarily to break the young children into small groups based on their reading ability. They huddle together to sound out words whose pronunciations baffle them. Eventually, throughout the day, every child stands in front of the room, shaking with fear as they speedily recite a few lines for the class, tensed for the moment when they can spring back to their seats. Mouths are shut unless called upon by the teacher. Punishment is simple, uncomplicated : failure to cooperate results in immediate loss of recess. Granny laughs, “I guess I was lucky in that once I wrote someone’s name on the board it usually embarassed them enough to start behaving and served as a warning for all of the other students”. As lunch approaches the children grow antsy. In tune with the rhythm of her students, Mrs. Blair senses their restlessness and rings the bell on her desk. Like robots, thirty tiny heads look up, thirty sets of eyes train on the teacher’s desk, alert with anticipation. No words are needed as the children line up behind each other like toy soldiers preparing to march. As rays of sunshine penetrate the crack in the classroom door their round, innocent faces are bathed in a glow of sweet freedom. A single disobedient sudent hangs back, head bowed over his desk, his name etched in white chalk on the blackboard, a warning to all. Outside the doors chaos ensues as the army of children disbands. Segments of students scurry to various corners of the blacktop. A jump rope beats a tattoo into the pavement as a group of girls jump mechanically to the beat, a mass of gingham dresses and flapping braids. A throng of boys toss around a weathered baseball, careful not to dirty their khaki pants and button downs. A bell chimes in the distance signaling the start of lunch hour. A mass of hungry children bottleneck at the entrance, fighting their way inside, eager to eat. No cafeteria exists here, Brown bagged lunches are the norm, but previously purchased tickets can be exchanged for the occasional hot meal, all served at your desk. The school day winds down after lunch as the students, stomachs full, grow sluggish. When the final bell rings, students crowd into the noisy bus hall, room of organized chaos where children eagerly await the buses that will carry them home. The unlucky teacher of the day monitors from the corner until the last student boards his or her bus. On a good afternoon the teachers will all be permitted to leave after the daily rush, but whenever the principal has an important mattter to discuss or just feels like talking he’ll call a faculty meeting in his office, the one and only teacher planning room. “We were lucky if we made it home by 6:00,” Granny grumbled

As I replay the image of a small elementary school isolated in the Pennsylvania countryside, one in which my grandmother was a teacher, I experience a sense of nostalgia for a time gone by and the simpler, home spun education I never received. Sure as I look back through our interview I’m thankful for all the educational oppurtunities I’ve received, none of which were avaiable back then. Granny agrees,“I think kids are going further in the subject matter and learning more today than we were teaching them back then” From extra curriculars to hot lunches I’m lucky to have these additions to the public school system which seem so commonplace today. But as an aside I can’t help but lament the character and charm modern schools have lost since the 50’s. While I’ve learned through many a history class that the past is something best left unrepeated, I’d have to argue it’s a crime not remember it. If I’ve gained anything during this interview its that while schools should continually be added to and improved, their beginnings should never be forgotten. For the schools of the 1950’s and beyond hold a sort of legacy of intergrity and discipline where students are held to the highest of expectations by teachers and parents, both in and out of the classroom. However humbly we start, we are never to forget where we came from. Rather we should honor the schools and the people that came before us and respect their role in shaping what are education has become.